

# Silicon Valley's Deep White Secret

By: Trevor Phillippi

It did not come as a surprise to many when Google published their diversity numbers that only 3% of tech employees at the company were black or hispanic, in a state, California, where about 44% of residents are black or hispanic. Some may point to high percentages of Asian-American workers as progress, but prominent tech journalist and entrepreneur Anil Dash, an Asian-American, states essentially that Asian-American men should be grouped with white men when evaluating diversity statistics, because their socioeconomic backgrounds generally are more similar to white americans than black or hispanic people. Looking at gender diversity in tech companies paints a similarly dismal picture, where technical employees are split 15/85 for female and male employees respectively, in 8 top tech companies that published their diversity data (New Yorker). More disheartening, is that for years these major tech companies have reported their figures including sales, marketing, and HR positions that skew the statistics into telling a different story.

Why is it important to distinguish between general employees of a company and technical employees, such as engineers, designers, and managers? Because these positions even at entry levels carry six-figure salaries compared to the much lower salaries of sales, marketing, and HR, in addition to the fact that technical employees are the ones shaping and building the products that these tech companies introduce into the world. Proliferation of consumer electronics have created cultures and economies where infrastructure is now a concept that exists not just in urban planning but on the internet. Many countries have declared affordable access to the internet a fundamental right (Reuters), and the infrastructure that results is not just serving the white male majority that builds it. Facebook, Twitter, and similar social networks have woven their way into everyday life as ubiquitous tools of communication. ECommerce platforms enable small businesses to start up with much lower cost than a traditional storefront.

These are positive things for transparency and upward mobility, but the problem is that the individuals that are shaping these products and services all share a similarly white and male perspective on the world, and very evidently struggle to empathize with the experiences of the people for whom they are creating products. There is a reason it's so difficult for prominent women in tech and culture to report harassment on Twitter, and its because Twitter was shaped by people for whom the prospect of being abused or targeted is only an idea intellectually, not empirically. These ubiquitous communication platforms have developed in a way the echoes the dangers of woman or person of color walking somewhere alone where they are unwelcome, where they will be suspected or harassed. As money continues to pour into and out of Silicon Valley, these companies become more and more out of touch with the 64% of the country that isn't a white dude. This is a sustainability issue because new economies and platforms exclude women and people of color *by design*.

Lastly, this issue *continues to concentrate wealth in demographics that already have it*. 83% of venture capital backed internet startups have all-white teams, and an even higher percentage of that has at least one white founder (Kane, Model View Culture). Some of the wealthiest individuals in the world are white men who gained their wealth through the tech industry, either through starting a successful company or by investing in one. This not only has the obviously dubious effect of handing more piles of cash to people that historically have not been too generous with it, but it paints a picture to young people of color and women that they are not welcome or potentially even unfit to take part in the shaping of the future of infrastructure.

Lauren C. Williams for ThinkProgress has some suggestions for addressing this issue that I agree with, and they deal with not only addressing “the pipeline”. The pipeline, is what many people see as the problem with tech diversity, which is that not enough women and people of color are receiving access and education in STEM. This may be true, but it ignores the people who fall out the pipe on the way into the industry, because of the “boys club” culture, which Williams mentions. She advocates for a two sided approach that fixes pipeline issues by providing better education and more diverse recruiting, as well as addressing the cultural issues inside tech companies and startups, and dispelling the myth of the meritocracy, which says that basically if you work hard enough you can make it into tech, and allows companies to not hire diverse employees on the basis of “culture fit”. As someone who is destined to be a slice on the white-male bar chart of Silicon Valley, I wholeheartedly agree with Williams’ analysis. It’s imperative that existing and new employees of these companies be intentional about being inclusive, so that diverse teams can shape products that serve a diverse population, and in doing so ensure high quality jobs for a lot of folks that need it most.

## Lauren C. Williams

<http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/06/03/3443112/how-google-and-silicon-valley-can-remedy-its-diversity-problem/>

Lauren C. Williams is a tech reporter at ThinkProgress who holds a master’s degree in journalism, and she regularly covers tech news and diversity issues. The main purpose of the article is to show that white men still dominate Google, which is representative of the whole issue, and she helps readers see through the veneer of not separating technical skills from other positions, and she suggest ways to remedy this issue. She fleshes out her point by quoting a tech worker and fellow african-american woman, Adria Richards, by offering some examples of Silicon Valley’s bias towards hiring white men. She goes on to dig deeper into the issues and suggest some concrete ways to address these systemic issues. Williams’ piece supports my writing by echoing many of my feelings about how to address these issues, as well as helping me think more about the problems of “meritocracy” and “culture-fit”. Specifically, I used Williams’ diversity stats for companies as well as her suggestions for how to fix tech culture.

Quotes:

Google's figures mimic what's going on in the predominately white and male tech industry overall.

Silicon Valley prizes its entrepreneurial culture, which is often described as a meritocracy where every one can succeed as long as they have the skills regardless of race, gender, class or background. That culture perpetuates the myth that there's a clear path to the top for anyone who is highly skilled, while reinforcing the idea that if you don't "make it," you simply didn't deserve it.

Critics say the "culture fit" reasoning is little more than a cover for a certain sense of comfort that comes from familiarity.

## Vauhini Vara

<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/pandora-white-male>

Vauhini Vara is a writer on business and technology living in the heart of tech culture in San Francisco, and has written for *The Wall Street Journal* and other major publications. The main point of her piece is helping non-tech readers to frame diversity statistics in the right way. She does this by first noting some news, that Pandora published their diversity statistics, then by showing two graphs that distinguish general employees from technical employees in big tech companies. I used the statistics she presents, and her work helps me to articulate why diversity stats can be misleading at first glance.

Quotes:

Across all the companies, tech workers, like software engineers, tend to be disproportionately male, and either white or Asian. At Pandora, for example, eighty-two per cent of global tech workers are male, while eighteen per cent are female—and white or Asian workers make up eighty-eight per cent of its U.S. tech workers. What makes certain companies look much more diverse than others may be that they happen to have fewer tech employees compared with workers in other areas, like marketers or salespeople.

Corporate culture, with all of its subtle signifiers and codes of conduct, is invariably linked to society's broader concept of culture—and all its complicated nuances having to do with race and gender

In Silicon Valley, it might seem innocuous, or even meritocratic, for a startup's software programmers to sit at the top of the social hierarchy—but, when you consider that software programmers, as a group, tend more often to be white and male, this becomes more fraught.

## Stanley Kane

<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/hr-antipatterns-at-startups>

<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/internet-famous-visibility-as-violence-on-social-media>

<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/five-good-things-happening-in-venture-capital>

Stanley Kane is the editor-in-chief of Model View Media, a critical publication examining issues of diversity and tech culture. She worked in the tech industry for about ten years before growing disillusioned with it, and left to start a business where she could make a living doing what she was already doing: being critical of Silicon Valley's monoculture. The main argument of her piece is that Human Resources departments at startups are either nonexistent or horribly mismanaged, and this leads to bad and potentially dangerous experiences for employees, and this contributes to the bad, white "brogrammer" culture of Silicon Valley. In her typical manner, Kane uses humor and incisive wit to get her point across. Rather than paint a picture of what HR at startups should be, she provides a list of "anti patterns" modeled after real work examples she's seen of bad practice, and she explains why these are bad. At the end, she examines the root causes of these issues, which she sees as the devaluation of HR because the perception of it is that it's "women's work" in a male industry. This piece supports my writing because it examines some of the more fundamental problems with the culture of the industry that can't be addressed by fixing "the pipeline". I used Kane's stats on VC funding for white led startups in my post, as well as some of her analysis on the deeper issues with tech culture.

### Quotes:

HR is often effectively absent from tech companies even as they balloon into hundreds of employees, banished perfunctorily by Silicon Valley's ruling class of white man-children who were handed millions of dollars far before showing the faintest sign of managerial skill.

Indeed, HR which does not fulfill its legal duties to anti-discrimination and employment law, its business responsibilities to shareholders, and its ethical duties to employees is part-and-parcel of tech's system of privilege... a system in which straight, white men must be assured access to wealth and power

while other groups must be exploited, discriminated against and denied opportunity at every step of the corporate ladder.

Contributing significantly to this, of course, is the fact HR is often gendered as “female” or “women’s work” in a male-dominated industry, branded “non-technical” in an industry that privileges only programming.

## **Other Citations**

<http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/05/29/3442514/google-diversity-report/>

<https://medium.com/message/the-tech-diversity-story-thats-not-being-told-9a36fb40530f>

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/17/spain-telecoms-idUSLH61554320091117>